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Psalm 81

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Psalm 81— Logotechnical Analysis

Guidelines

- Please read the [General Introduction](#) as well as the Introduction to [Book I](#) and [Book III](#).
- For common features found in the numerical analysis charts, see the "[Key to the charts](#)".

Specific features of Psalm 81

- Like Psalm 82, with which it has much in common in terms of form and content, Psalm 81 is a fine specimen of high-grade compositional craftsmanship. As in Psalms 77, 80, and 83, the typical envelope technique is used: in this case, to position the **69**-word divine speech, [vs. 7-15](#), in the middle of the poem, surrounded by **51** (3 x 17) words. The number **69** represents the numerical value of the first word: הַרְנִינוּ, 'sing out in praise!'.
- Psalm 81 has two distinct meaningful centres: that of the entire psalm, and that of the divine speech (vs. 7-15). The latter gives the reason for what is said in the former. The first centre is the 4 middle words, [v. 9b](#), וְשָׁמַעְתָּ אֶם־תִּשְׁמַע־לִי, 'O that you would listen to me, Israel!' (58 + 4 + 58); the second is the 3 middle words in [v. 11a](#), אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, 'I, YHWH, am your God!' (69 = 33 + 3 + 33). The name **YHWH** appears precisely at its centre and is significantly flanked by **34** (2 x 17) words on either side (69 = 34 + 1 + 34).
- As in Psalms 74 and 79, Psalm 81 has an extra meaningful centre in each of the two main cantos: [v. 5](#) in Canto I, and [v. 12](#) in Canto II.

Strophic structure - Canto/Stanza boundary: ||

- Van der Lugt, Fokkelman and Labuschagne: 2-4, 5-6b, 6c-8 || 9-11, 12-13, 14-15 || 16-17 (3 cantos with 7 strophes, 16 verselines and 35 cola).

Logotechnical analysis

- Columns **a** and **b** show the number of words before and after the atnach.
- Column **c**: the words spoken by the prophet; **d**: the words in the oracle.
- The numbering of the verselines is in **brown**.

		Total	a	b	c	d
1	לְמַנְצִיחַ עַל־הַנְּתִית לְאַסְרָה: Heading, v. 1	4	4			
2	הַרְנִינוּ לְאֱלֹהִים עֲזָנוּהָ 1	3	3		3	
	הָרִיעוּ לְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב: (5+20+14+10+14+6 = 69)	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 2	6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
3	שְׁאוּזְמָרָה וּתְנוּ־תָרָא 2	4	4		4	
	כְּנוֹר נָעִים עִם־נָבֶל:	4		4	4	
	Total, v. 3	8	= 4	+ 4	= 8	+ 0
4	תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָרָא 3	3	3		3	
	בִּכְסָה לְיוֹם חֲגִנּוּ:	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 4	6	= 3	+ 3	= 6	+ 0
	Strophe 1 Total, v. 2-4	20	= 10	+ 10	= 20	+ 0
5	מִי חֵק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּאֵא 4	4	4		4	
	מִשְׁפָּט לְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב: Canto I (7 = 3 + 1 + 3)	3		3	3	
	Total, v. 5	7	= 4	+ 3	= 7	+ 0
	6a-b					
	יַעֲרֹת בִּיהוֹסָף שְׁמוֹ 5	3	3		3	
	בְּצִאתוֹ עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם	4	4		4	
	Total, v. 2-6b	34	= 21	+ 13	= 34	+ 0
	Strophe 2 Total, v. 5-6b	14	= 11	+ 3	= 14	+ 0

6c	שָׁפַת לֹא־יִדְעָתִי אֲשַׁמֶּעַ:	6	4		4	4	
7	הִסְרוּתִי מִסֶּבֶל שְׁכֻמוֹיָהּ		3	3			3
	כִּפְיוֹ מִדּוֹד תַּעֲבֹרְנָה:		3		3		3
	Total, v. 6c-7		6	= 3	+ 3	= 0	+ 6
8	בַּצָּרָה קָרָאתָ וְאַחֲלָצְךָ	7	3	3			3
	אֶעֱנֶךָ בְּסֹתֵר רַעֲמִי		3	3			3
	אֲבַחֲנֶךָ עַל־מִי מְרִיבָה סֵלָה:		4		4		4
	Total, v. 8		10	= 6	+ 4	= 0	+ 10
	Total, v. 7-8		16	= 9	+ 7	= 0	+ 16
Strophe 3	Total, v. 6c-8		20	= 9	+ 11	= 4	+ 16
	Total, v. 5-8		34	= 20	+ 14	= 18	+ 16
Canto I	Total, v. 2-8		54	= 30	+ 24	= 38	+ 16

9	שָׁמַע עַמִּי וְאַעֲדָה בְּךָ	8	4	4			4
	יִשְׂרָאֵל אִם־תִּשְׁמַע־לִי:		4		4		4
	120=58+4+58 and 35=17+1+17 Total, v. 9		8	= 4	+ 4	= 0	+ 8
10	לֹא־יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֵל זָרִי	9	5	5			5
	וְלֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל נָכָר:		4		4		4
	Total, v. 10		9	= 5	+ 4	= 0	+ 9
	Total, v. 9-10		17	= 9	+ 8	= 0	+ 17
11	אֲנֹכִי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ	10	3	3			3
	הַמַּעֲלֶךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם		3	3			3
	הַרְחֹב־פִּיךָ וְאַמְלֵאֲהוּ:		3		3		3
	69 = 34 + 1 + 34		9	= 6	+ 3	= 0	+ 9
	69 = 33 + 3 + 33		26	= 15	+ 11	= 0	+ 26
	Vs. 9-11, Prohibition of idolatry Total, v. 11						
	Middle strophe (7=3+1+3) Strophe 4, v. 9-11						
12	וְלֹא־שָׁמַע עַמִּי לְקוֹלִי	11	4	4			4
	וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־אָבָה לִי:		4		4		4
	Total, v. 12		8	= 4	+ 4	= 0	+ 8
	Total, v. 11-12		17	= 10	+ 7	= 0	+ 17
	Total, v. 9-12		34	= 19	+ 15	= 0	+ 34
13	וְאַשְׁלַחְתִּהוּ בְּשָׂרִירוֹת לִבָּם	12	3	3			3
	וְלִכּוֹ בְּמוֹעֲצוֹתֵיהֶם:		2		2		2
	Total, v. 13		5	= 3	+ 2	= 0	+ 5
	Total, v. 12-13		13	= 7	+ 6	= 0	+ 13
	Total, v. 9-13		39	= 22	+ 17	= 0	+ 39
14	לֹא עַמִּי שָׁמַע לִי	13	4	4			4
	יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַרְכֵי יִהְלֹכוּ:		3		3		3
15	כְּמַעַט אוֹיְבֵיהֶם אֲכַנֶּיֶם	14	3	3			3
	וְעַל צָרֵיהֶם אָשִׁיב יָדִי:		4		4		4
	Total, v. 14-15		14	= 7	+ 7	= 0	+ 14
	Total, v. 12-15		27	= 14	+ 13	= 0	+ 27
	Second oracle Canto II Total, v. 9-15		53	= 29	+ 24	= 0	+ 53
	Entire oracle heard by the prophet, v. 7-15		69	= 38	+ 31	= 0	+ 69

16	מִשְׁנֵאֵי יְהוָה יִכְחָשׁוּ-לוֹיֹה־	15	4	4	4
	Vs. 16-17 Coda	וַיְהִי עֲתָם לְעוֹלָם:	3	3	3
		Total, v. 16	7	= 4 + 3	= 7 + 0
17	וַיֹּאכִילֵהוּ מִחֶלֶב חֶטְאִי	16	3	3	3
		וּמִצֹּר רֶבֶשׁ אֲשַׁבֵּיעָךְ:	3	3	3
		Total, v. 17	6	= 3 + 3	= 6 + 0
	Canto III Strophe 7	Total, v. 16-17	13	= 7 + 6	= 13 + 0
		Total, v. 14-17	27	= 14 + 13	= 13 + 14
		Total, v. 2-17	120	= 66 + 54	= 51 + 69
		With the heading, v. 1-17	124	= 70 + 54	
		With סֵלָה (1x), v. 1-17	125	= 70 + 55	

Observations

1. In terms of the 120 words of the poem, the arithmetic centre is constituted by the 4 words in [v. 9b](#) (120 = 58 + 4 + 58):

יִשְׂרָאֵל אִם-תִּשְׁמַע-לִי 'O that you would listen to me, Israel!'

The arithmetic centre on word level coincides precisely with the *middle colon*, flanked by 17 cola on either side (35 = 17 + 1 + 17). I have no doubt that this is the deliberately designed meaningful centre of the psalm. In terms of content, the passionate plea of YHWH with his people to listen to him is a most eloquent expression of the purpose of the oracle.

In his short note, "Numerical Devices in Biblical Poetry", VT 38/3 (1988), p. 333-337, Jacob Bazak wrote: 'In Ps. lxxxi the central sentence is in v. 9: "Israel, if you would but listen to me." This sentence starts 58 words from the beginning and ends 58 words from the end of the psalm (not counting the first verse, which is merely a heading, nor the word "Selah")'.

He also drew attention to the 3-word arithmetic centre of [Psalm 23](#), flanked by 26 words, and the 4-word centre of [Psalm 92](#), flanked by 52 (2 x 26) words.

However, there is more to say about the meaningful centre. It is positioned within the 17-word two *middle verselines*, [vs. 9-10](#), flanked by 7 verselines (16 = 7 + 2 + 7). This larger centre, on its part, falls within the *middle strophe*, [vs. 9-11](#), the pivot of the 7 strophes: vs. 2-4, 5-6b, 6c-8, [9-11](#), 12-13, 14-15, 16-17. The middle strophe is highlighted by the fact that it is made up of exactly 26 words, which is not surprising since it deals with a matter of paramount importance: the prohibition of idolatry.

As pointed out by Van der Lugt (private communication), each of the two main cantos (vs. 2-8 and 9-15) has its own meaningful centre in terms of verselines (7 = 3+1+3): [v. 5](#) constitutes the middle verseline of Canto I, and [v. 12](#) constitutes that of Canto II. As in Psalm 74 (see there [Observation 2](#)) and in Psalm 79 (see there [Observation 4](#)) the two extra meaningful centres are closely related in terms of content.

2. Let us now examine the divine speech in vs. 7-15 more closely. In doing so, we first have to determine the precise position of the 4 words of v. 6c, שָׁפַת לֹא-יָדַעְתִּי אֲשַׁמֶּע, 'I hear an unfamiliar voice'. Some scholars take the phrase as part of the divine speech, presumed to be vs. 6c-15. However, many commentators and translators rightly regard v. 6c as belonging to the introductory speech by the prophet, which serves specifically to introduce the words attributed to YHWH. It is impossible to imagine YHWH saying, "I hear an unfamiliar voice"; only the prophet can say this.

Therefore, the words attributed to YHWH are to be found in the **69** words of **vs. 7-15**. The numerical evidence corroborates the latter view in a most decisive way. The divine speech consists of two oracles: the *First Oracle* is to be found in **vs. 7-8**, clearly demarcated by *selah*. The *Second Oracle* is to be found in **vs. 9-15**; it lacks an introductory formula, presumably for logotechnical reasons.

This is the numerical framework of the psalm based on the assumption of a **69-word** divine speech:

Strophe 1-2 (2-6b)	The prophet's call to praise God	34 w.
(v. 6c)	Specific introduction to first oracle	4 w.
Strophe 3 (7-8)	YHWH pleads with Israel to listen	16 w.
Strophe 4 (9-11)	YHWH warns against idolatry	26 w.
Strophe 5-6 (12-15)	YHWH judges disobedience	27 w.
Strophe 7 (16-17)	The prophet's conclusion	13 w.
Total (vs. 2-17)		51 + 69 words

The compositional structure of Psalm 81 is very similar to that of Psalms 77, 80, and 83, consisting of a central section surrounded by a framework, defined by significant numbers. In this case, the **69-word** central section, spoken by YHWH, is enveloped by **51** (3 x 17) words (34 + 4 + 13). The first part of the Second Oracle, **vs. 9-11** - which has exactly **26** words - clearly constitutes the kernel of the words spoken by YHWH.

Note that the 3 words in v. 17b, quoted by the prophet as spoken by God, do not belong to the oracle. They form part of the coda of the psalm, the concluding strophe, highlighted by the abrupt change from words spoken about God, vs. 16-17a, to words directly attributed to God. For this typical highlighting device in connection with the coda, see the [General Introduction](#), "The use of a coda as a device for conclusion".

3. The fact that the two oracles are made up of altogether **69** words is no coincidence, because **69** is the numerical value of the very first word of the psalm, **הַתְּהַלְלִי**, 'sing out in praise!' (5 + 20 + 14 + 10 + 14 + 6). Compare especially Psalm 80 for the use of a similar gematric device.

The **69** words are arranged in such a way that the name **יְהוָה** (in v. 11a), constitutes the pivot of the divine speech. In addition to this, it is strikingly flanked by **34** (2 x 17) words on either side: **69 = 34 + 1 + 34**. In its turn, the Name is positioned precisely in the middle of the phrase **אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ**, 'I, YHWH, am your God!' (33 + 3 + 33), which recalls the first words of the Decalogue.*

Since the phrase expresses the leading idea of the psalm, that YHWH is the one and only God for Israel, it should be regarded, in my view, as the consciously designed meaningful centre of the divine speech. The pivotal positioning of the name YHWH functions as a device to highlight the meaningful centre. See the [General Introduction](#), under "Special devices to highlight the meaningful centre".

The **39** words of the first part of the Second Oracle, vs. 9-13, are likewise skilfully arranged to form an impressive concatenation of symbolic numbers constituting the YHWH *echad* formula, **26 + 13 = 39**:

* The pivot is also strongly reminiscent of the 3 central words of Psalm 23.

vs. 9-10		17	
v. 11	26	9	34
v. 12		8	
v. 13	13	5	
vs. 9-13		39	

It goes without saying that the YHWH *echad* formula fits the contents of the oracle most appropriately. It logotechnically underscores YHWH's passionate plea with Israel not to bow down to foreign gods, but to recognize him as their one and only God.

The ultimate fate of such foreign gods is the theme of Psalm 82, which deals with YHWH's judgement of the so-called gods.

That the YHWH *echad* formula has been deliberately designed gains in plausibility in light of the fact that I have detected exactly the same concatenation of symbolic numbers forming the this formula in the core of Psalm 29. See Observations 3 and 4 in my analysis of [Psalm 29](#).

4. In the compositional formula of vs. 9-12 (a section of the text of Canto II, vs. 9-15), the division of the **34** words into **19** before and **15** after *atnach* is probably deliberate. It gives the remarkable formula **34 = 19 + 15**, which is used elsewhere – in six other Psalms and in Deuteronomy – consistently in contexts dealing with Israel's apostasy and the loss of the land. Compare v. 13, which hints at Israel's apostasy and its consequences! The formula in question recalls in particular the compositional formula of the admonitory oracle in Ps. 95:8-11, **34 = 19a + 15b**. For the significance of this intriguing formula, see Observation 3 in my Analysis of [Psalm 95](#).
5. The name יהוה occurs only 2x (vs. 11a and 16a); so does אֱלֹהִים, which refers, however, to a foreign god (vs. 10a and b). The word אֱלֹהִים occurs 4x, all referring to YHWH (vs. 2a, 2b, 5b, and 11a).

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